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Hindi Cinema and Half-forgotten Dialects: An Interview with Ashis Nandy

Christopher Pinney

> India as a culture area will be nowhere, I think, in the world of knowledge, the sciences and arts, if it does not first defy the European monopoly of the scientific method established in modern times.[1]

These words are by the anthropologist J.P.S. Uberoi, but they can also be used to adumbrate one of the starting points from which the cultural critic and historian Ashis Nandy has set about investigating the "vestigal dialects" that have remained beneath the mimicry with which India responded to the West. In certain idioms of popular culture, Nandy has recovered what might—in other contexts—be termed a Ginzburgian subaltern subconscious with which to attack the simplicities of colonialism. He is searching for "an ethically sensitive and culturally rooted alternative social knowledge" and believes that this is "already partly available outside the modern social sciences [among] those who have been the 'subjects,' consumers or experimentees of these sciences" (1983:xvii). Nandy—who might be caricatured as a neo-Gandhian [2]—is intent on recovering a third space from which an assault can be made on the West and the West's slavish imitators who have been largely responsible for the current state of the world:

> It has become more and more apparent that genocides, ecodisasters and ethnocides are but the underside of corrupt sciences and psychopathic technologies wedded to new secular hierarchies, which have reduced major civilizations to the status of a set of empty rituals. The ancient forces of human greed and violence...have merely found a new legitimacy in anthropocentric doctrines of secular salvation, in the ideologies of progress, normality and hyper-masculinity, and in theories of cumulative growth of science and technology (1983:x).

This quote comes from his most significant and best known book, *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism* (1983), which has established Nandy as a leading theorist of colonialism as it impacted upon both quotidian and remarkable Indians.

A seminal idea proposed in *The Intimate Enemy* which has subsequently come rather to define Nandy's (frequently mis-represented) public political stance concerns the disjunctions imposed by colonialism which have returned to haunt contemporary India. The penetration of the West has created a class of mimic men, "modernists, whose attempts to identify with the colonial aggressors has produced...pathetic copies of...Western man in the subcontinent" (1983:74) and Nandy places his hopes with a different class of Indians who are "neither pre-modern, nor anti-modern but only non-modern" (ibid). It is here that Nandy's essentialism ceases to look merely "strategic" as he seeks to ontologize his preferred brand of wisdom ("perfect weakness") in the depths of the Indian tradition. He concludes *The Intimate Enemy* with the observation that in some cultures (i.e., India), "ancient wisdom" is also "an everday truism."

"The nineteenth-century dream of one world has re-emerged," he continues, but "this time as a nightmare" (1991:x). Cruder forms of racism on which colonialism was dependent are on the retreat, but for Nandy there is a second, more insidious, form of colonization which must now be confronted. This is a techno-rational vision of the world (a "secular hierarchy") whose internalization by nationalists was a prerequisite for liberation,[3] but which is now in permament conflict with a more enduring order which Nandy is content to call "tradition." "The West is now everywhere, within the West and outside; in structures and in

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minds" (1991:xi) and Nandy's concern has been to both trace how this came to be and also to discover those areas of daily life in which Indians have sought to resist this ongoing colonization. One of these areas of daily life with which Nandy has recently become increasingly concerned is popular Indian cinema, in some of which, he argues, can be found "vestigial traces of a dialect which everyone had half-forgotten." This phrase comes from a remarkable Gandhi Memorial Lecture, delivered in 1987, "The Discreet Charms of Indian Terrorism," in which he traces the events surrounding two hijackings of Indian Airline jets by Sikh militants in 1984. For Nandy, the interior of a hijacked aircraft is a kind of laboratory in which his suppositions about morality and politics can be tested. What he finds is that in this claustrophobic space, external identities quickly start to break down. There is no Hobbesian jungle: instead a co-operative pattern of behavior informed by a sense of common humanity starts to emerge (1990a:35). Following the hijacking, events unfolded within "the limits imposed by another moral order" (1990a:37).

This moral order was quite different from that of the state, and quite different also from that of Nandy's other detestation, the middle class, although he sometimes singles out what he terms the *haute bourgeoisie*. A significant element in the articulation of this new morality was the meeting ground afforded by popular Hindi film music. A young hijacker sang "melancholy songs of separation and love from Hindi films" and the passengers asked him to sing more (1987:32). Nandy detects here a sub-strata of popular culture with dialogic possibilities:

> ...the maudlin and comic aspects of the air piracy, the aspects most likely to jar on the sensitivities of the urbane Indian *haute bourgeoisie*, were exactly the ones that helped to establish the links among the three parties involved (1987:38)[4]

At this time of crisis, in which everyone was staking their lives, learned techno-rationalist codes were jettisoned and "real convictions about the nature of the interpersonal world" and "deepest private theories" were tested. And, Nandy concludes, they were not found wanting. He finds it enormously significant that at such times of testing truth it is not the statist bourgeois sentiments of the editorial pages of the national dailies to which people appeal, but the sentiments to be found in commercial Hindi movies.[5] This suggests that such movies are something much more complex and relevant than "half-digested global mass culture" and Nandy proposes that:

> in trying to cater to the lowest common denominator of popular taste, the popular movies in the subcontinent have unwittingly established an intricate relationship with some of the deep but marginalised sources of Indian culture (1990a:38).

This is an interpetation which Nandy himself concedes may appear "romantic or mystifying" (1990a:36). Like much of his work from the *Intimate Enemy* onwards, it can be charged with being essentialist and highly romanticized (and when I interviewed him he was notably less willing to make such claims for Hindi film), but it is also an argument that I have found enormously seductive, a typically perceptive and intriguing insight from a remarkable mind.

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As we sat in the garden of the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies in Delhi,[6] I asked first about one of Ashis Nandy's current projects, an edited volume of essays on film in India.

AN: Originally, the idea was to interface film theoreticians with political and social analysts but that misfired. The environment [during the preceeding conference in Mysore] didn't trigger an interesting enough dialogue and in retrospect I came to the conclusion that the problem was not so much with political and social analysts who want to get on with the job but with film theory which for many has become a more esoteric specialised genre. [...] I have reconstituted the book primarily as an attempt to look into the politics and sociology of popular films, in some cases through highly personalized narratives.

CP: *How do you see this approach to film fitting in more generally with the theoretical thrust of your work? I see a Ginzburgian attachment to popular culture which you describe somewhere as a "vestigal*

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dialect" through which local discourses become apparent.

AN: My primary concern is with the unique concern which prevails in India—the clash between popular and mass culture. In the West popular culture and mass culture are one. That's the way that they have been traditionally viewed during the last several decades. The implicit assumption is that popular culture is mass-culture—because these societies are primarily urban and primarily massified. In other kinds of society, popular culture can be seen in terms of three aspects:

First, popular culture as folk culture which is neither dead nor marginalized. Seventy-five percent of Indians are still in rural areas where folk culture is popular culture. Grandmother's remedies might be a marginal or vestigal form in the West, surviving in the interstices of Western life because modern medicine dominates life. Here, modern medicine does not dominate life, even in urban areas; according to available estimates, eighty-five percent also use some form of traditional medicine. So the popular is not dead or marginalized—it is the dominant system.

Secondly, there is the popular culture of the Indian middle classes, which has grown out of the last 150 years of encounter with the West. This is often very carefully developed by some very gifted individuals looking for new modes of articulating their concerns.[7] For instance, the novel came to India in the middle of the ninteenth century, mainly through the English language; I doubt if many Indians think of it as a foreign medium today—it has been totally integrated. Similarly, other forms of visual arts, the cinema for instance, borrow elements from Indian folk traditions, Indian classicism, Western folk traditions, Western classicism, in order to grapple with certain kinds of polarity—tradition, modernity, etc.

Because this form of popular culture is an adaptive genre it also has very distinctive styles of adaptation in different parts of India—Bengali, Marathi, Hindi and Tamil films are all identifiably different, though that difference has been diminishing during the last two decades. They are products of distinct regional cultures which have experienced modernity in different ways. The regional films have developed forms which incorporate the new experience of these cultures in ways the folk cannot always do—the folk just doesn't have the resilience to do it, nor the elasticity. This is the domain of popular culture as opposed to the domain of folk culture. This is popular culture proper.

Thirdly, there is popular culture as mass culture in the genuine statistical sense and like all forms of mass culture it is exportable and is fully universal. It doesn't matter whether you buy MacDonald's hamburgers in Tokyo or in Delhi.

CP: *Except here it's made of lamb.*

AN: I'm told that they're going to make it from buffalo meat here; MacDonald's is coming to India in style. The aim in mass culture is always to reproduce the original standardized product. The lamb or the buffalo-meat hamburgers will also be made to resemble beef hamburgers. Coca-Cola is the same whether you buy it in Rio de Janeiro or Helsinki.

CP: *But doesn't everyone drink Coca-Cola in a different way?*

AN: They do, but they have to drink Coca-Cola in different ways. It is a tamed plurality and there are limits to such plurality. India for a while tried to produce local variants of Coca-Cola, Campa-Cola and other such stuff. One producer tried a touch of almond, then another had success with cardamom. But they did not last. The point I'm trying to make is that mass-culture usually doesn't brook many differences; it has its own distinctive style and sticks to it. It can be catholic, but it always moves toward standardization because it is oriented to atomized individuals, not to communities. When the airline Pan Am experimented with Indian cuisine as its vegetarian option, it did so not only in India but all over the world.

To return to our main concern, I locate Indian commercial films in a matrix defined by the popular, the folk, the classical and the mass-culture. It is a third dimensional space between the folk and the classical, and the popular and the mass. And when we say that there is homogenization in these films, it is because the mass element becomes dominant. In this respect there *is* a difference between the films of the 1980s and the films of the 1950s or 1960s; Raj Kapoor and Guru Dutt are typically "popular." Earlier you could easily distinguish between a Bombay style, a Madras style and a Bengal style. Even that is becoming difficult today, though there is still a north Indian and south Indian style.

Today Bombay cinema has become hegemonic. There is no longer a regional cinema left. Hindi cinema has become Indian cinema and the rest are now its

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regional variations. Something similar is happening in Indian political culture. In a democratic order, certain kinds of voice, language and styles of articulation should have a natural presence, however local. And they *did* have such presence until the late 1960s and early 1970s, but since then they have been constantly losing ground. Indian political culture, too, has increasingly become more open to dominance by smaller segments of society which previously dominated the public life only in areas which were marked out as specialist domains.

CP: *You recently said that Hindi film "asks the right questions but arrives at the wrong answers."*

AN: I meant that with every issue these films have handled, implicity or explicitly, they have consistently touched the heart of social or psychological problems because they have to survive at the box-office. Their treatment of core myths and cultural concerns are conventionalized in ways that are more acceptable to the dominant culture of the state. But they do not shirk the issues South Asians are most concerned with. Take for instance a movie like Amitabh Bachchan's *Deewaar* [8] which can be thought of as a remake of *Mother India*.[9] The convention of this genre is that there are two brothers, one an upright police officer, the other a criminal who has entered crime out of frustration with the world and in response to the injustices he or his family has suffered. This is an old story which has been told hundreds of times and usually it's a great success. The movie examines the conflict between the upright brother and the criminal brother as a moral struggle over corruption—one brother seeking revenge and the other seeking to reaffirm social norms. But if we look at the story, it's also obvious that this is a battle over the mother. The moral brother gets the mother; the immoral one does not.

CP: *So what is the connection with the dominant culture of the state?*

AN: It is turned into an argument between the brothers over public norms, what the police should do, what is their duty as against that of the criminal. They discuss public norms within a framework of whom the mother should endorse. The treatment of the movie is in terms of moral choices between public and private norms, conformity and dissent, and the latent message is that moral choices have to be endorsed by the primordial authority of the mother, not by the impersonal authority of the state and civil society.

CP: Deewaar *would be an example of the "lost and found" genre. Why are these so popular in Hindi film?*

AN: The brothers are actually the same persona deliberately divided and then put back together again. That's the inner logic of the film. The crucial strategic device is that of doubling. Nowhere else in the world will you find such an enormous fascination with doubling. The *Prisoner of Zenda,* which has two or three versions in English, has in India not less than twenty direct versions, probably more than thirty. And if we take into account other kinds of doubling—two brothers getting separated at birth, by accident, in a storm, etc. they are even more numerous. Doubling is a means of handling psychological qualities which one is forced to negotiate and with which one is uncomfortable. You exteriorize the qualities and turn them into sociological factors, so that the qualities which are inside you can be projected outwards as another person with whom you apparently come to terms sociologically, not psychologically.

CP: *Sudhir Kakar would explain that in terms of traditional Indian family values, the split from the mother, etc. Would you give it a much more historical explanation in terms of colonial mimicry, and so on?*

AN: Yes and no. There's a contradiction between tradition and modernity so that the modern brother gets a traditional village girl as his lover, and the traditional brother, a farm hand in some obscure village, gets an ultra-modern woman doctor and these two kinds of liaison establish a new relationship between the old and the new, tradition and modernity, the East and the West. Later in the film, when the two brothers come to each other's rescue (the traditional brother rescues the modern brother, or vice-versa), a new relationship is established between the two sets.

CP: *But it does always seem to be that the traditional overpowers the modern, rather than the other way round.*

AN: Not always. If the parents are objecting to the heroine's marriage on caste grounds, then usually it is shown that the young couple triumph over caste norms.

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Tradition is given a special place when it seems to stand against the anomie and normlessness of the city-slick, street-smart brother who is also modern. In that case, the traditional brother comes to the rescue to establish a dialogue that lets him have the last word. Traditional virtues triumph. The innocence of the village—the innocence of the child.

[Elsewhere, Nandy writes of the "ultra-modern, arrogant, super-competent, western-educated professional {who} has to ultimately turn to his twin—a rustic...to defeat the hardhearted smuggler or black-marketeer, who in turn is a negative model of modernity and a negative mix of the east and west" (1992:70-71)].

CP: *You're suggesting that the resolution is not so much a conservative triumphing of traditional order as the triumph of innocence and local discourse.*

AN: Yes, of course. It's only recently that people have begun to take some serious interest in these movies. Previously a standard criticism by those who dismissed them was that they were conservative. But they are not conservative. They have, even if by default, their own conception of limits, and the films can be seen as an exploration of these limits—limits of modernity, of tradition, of mothering, limits of evil and tolerance. It was this model which began to dissolve to some extent in the late 1970s with the entry of mass-culture—in which the violence is more realistic, more gory.

[This particular notion of "innocence" is developed in *The Intimate Enemy* where Nandy writes about an "'authentic innocence, which finally defeated colonialism, however much the modern mind might to like to give the credit to world historical forces, internal contradictions of capitalism and to the political horse-sense or 'voluntary self-liquidation' of the rulers" (1991:xii-xiii). For more on Nandy's argument on the contrasting approaches of "art" and "commercial" cinema to the victims of Indian modernity. see 1992:49, where he argues that "commercial cinema romanticizes and, given half a chance, vulgarizes the problems of the survival sector but it never rejects as childish or primitive the categories or the worldviews of those trying to survive the processes of victimization let loose by...modern institutions."]

CP: *Can that local discourse hold up in the face of ZTV?*[10]

AN: It will be placed under greater pressure, but it will come back just as it is coming back in the West. It will take time for people to develop the kind of scepticism which in the West people have already developed towards television. Doordarshan makes people sceptical because they have made a mess of their ham-handed propaganda, but in India there's no scepticism of the media as such. For instance, the BBC is trusted much more in India than it is in England. On the whole there is no genuine scepticism of the media. This will take more time. People must sense the threat that the local and the vernacular face from a universalized total medium for there to be a space for both.

CP: *What would your response be to a future historian of film who, ten years hence, argued that two singularly important factors explain what has happened in Hindi film of the 1990s. Firstly, that the audience has changed and that increasingly films have been directed at the urban single male migrant in search of sex, violence and the remembrance of his absent family. Secondly, the rise of* Hindutva, *which has created a complicity between popular Hindi film and contemporary popular chauvinist politics? Would this convince you?*

AN: I would be convinced on both points. If by *Hindutva* you mean the ideology of the state which goes with *Hindutva*, frankly it's no different from the ideology of state which has come to dominate Indian conservative liberal and leftist thought—a standardized theory of the state which was very popular in India until the late 1980s. The *Hindutva* view is totally "statist"—totally convinced that a homogenous national culture is necessary to ensure that the state does not collapse, totally convinced that the culture has to be hard-boiled, hard-eyed, real-politik based, fully secular. It is in this sense that the ideology of *Hindutva* is paralleled by the ideology of the state which the Hindi film has propogated over the last forty to fifty years, or maybe even longer from the 1930s onwards. But then, this has been the dominant message in Indian public life for a long time, that we have everything in our civilisation but a proper state. The state is essentialized and it is assumed that the more centralized the state the better because you cannot trust the local *satraps* and notables who are even more

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exploitative and bloodthirsty than the centralized leadership can ever be, and that all these concepts of village republics and local democracy are Gandhian hogwash, mystification propagated by parts of the freedom movement, the time of which is past. This theme has been part of the folk-wisdom of modern Indian politics in general. From the politics of the extreme left to those of the extreme right, there has been almost no dissent on this score. The *Hindutva* movement is a by-product of this dominant ideology.

But Indian cinema is one of the few places where there is natural tolerance of diversity, particularly religious diversity. Partly because the film world does not bother who is a Muslim, who is a Hindu. *Mother India* is a very Hindu film only if we forget that it was a Muslim who made it and a Muslim immortalized its central character. To deny this authorship is to deny that the communal confrontation we are seeing is partly a by-product of secular politics.

[Just recently, Nandy has further stressed *Hindutva*'s distance from popular religious culture: "*Hindutva* which comically mimics 19th century European nationalism, also carries in its veins a deep hostility towards everyday Hinduism and ordinary Hindus, inherited from its unofficial Euoropean parentage"(1994).]

CP: *This suggests quite a profound contradiction: you are saying that on the one hand Hindi film is a vehicle for vestigial discourse—local voices—but that it's also a vehicle for pro-state statements. I'm thinking in particular of your "Discreet Charms of the Indian Terrorist" lecture in which you argue that through film songs people found a medium for non-modern communality.*

AN: Well, yes, there is a latent message. Even the violence is stylized—in one film, *Don*,[11] when Amitabh Bachchan fights a climactic fight with the villain—life and death battle—he stops and says—"hold on, let me eat *paan*"—and then resumes fighting. Even within contemporary realistic violence there is something playful about it, clues are continually given to the audience that the violence is not serious. *Naseeb*[12] would be a very good example of this.

Let me make an autobiographical statement. I came to these films because of my interest in middle-class culture and politics. I see a lot of the problems in Indian politics arising from middle-class attempts to prevent the hoi polloi from getting their due under democratic politics. Demographically and electorally, the middle class is a small minority in India—for that matter in the whole of South Asia—and it can only legitimize its disproportionate power through ideology, an ideology that allows the middle-class to believe that it stands between the barbarians outside the city walls and the citizenry inside. The ideology functions in another way. It allows you to take out of politics sector after sector and hand them over to experts—from development and planning to diplomacy—on the grounds that the ordinary politics demanded by ordinary people cannot work and the sector must be handed over to professionals, all naturally drawn from the middle-class. There is a widespread belief in the Indian bourgeoisie that ordinary Indians are not fit to be full citizens of a modern nation state because they don't understand what modernity is and the middle-class must become the new vanguard for the masses. The state has been beautifully retooled for this particular purpose; it keeps in check the full political consequences of the democratic process.

A critique of nationalism is, therefore, also a critique of the Indian middle-class which has lost its confidence and is feeling marginalized. They find any critique deeply disturbing. For instance, that article you mention, "The Discreet Charm of Indian Terrorism," the kind of attacks I faced over that—I was accused of "romanticizing" terrorism; some asked me, "what about the human rights of passengers"; others said, "you are supporting separatism."

CP: *The argument about specialism suggests a paradox in your own engagement with Hindi film. There's always a danger that you are then going to turn this popular myth into a domain of experts.*

AN: Yes, that's right, and I am afraid of it—actually my questions to the Hindi film are simply political ones.

[Subsequently I was struck by an interesting contradiction in Nandy's own methodology which, through its conscious myth-making attempts to remove him from one forum of cultural criticism (conventional academic debate), and establishes him as a different kind of inviolable expert (a shaman). In *The Intimate Enemy* he writes that a "purely professional critique" (by social scientists) will not do; rather it will have to be

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fought "the way one fights myths: by building or resurrecting more convincing myths" (1983:xviii). Parallel to this, Nandy states in a later collection of essays: "I shall not grudge it if some enterprising reviewer finds unconvincing history in the following pages, as long as he finds in them convincing myths"(1980:vii).]

CP: *How should people be approaching film? I was struck when recently reading Dissanayake and Sahai's* Sholay*—which is methodologically excellent—how difficult it is to produce really exciting analysis through audience response. Do you think in the future you may do an ethnography of film-viewing? I've been struck by the fact that often you've alluded to your viewing of these films on video rather than in the cinema—your experience of film is in this privatized context?*

AN: Yes, it is. But a few of my students have taken an interest in this. And if I had thought of it earlier, I would have encouraged a study of audience responses to *Khal Nayak.*

Films, however, are not only for viewing; the film industry, what the stars do in public, film music—they all have a cultural presence. For instance, I've also taken an interest in the uses of astrology in the film industry. Astrology is used mechanically in traditional India—for a daughter's marriage, choosing the right moment for a *puja*, the time of a journey, but elsewhere in the modern sector its presence is enormous—especially in the stock market, and among politicians, sports stars and film stars.

CP: *But beyond the timing of the* muhurat [13] *how does it affect the timing of anything? Everyone is juggling their dates on an entirely pragmatic basis.*

AN: The astrologer may say that the film must have fourteen or eleven letters, because it is the lucky number, or that the name must start with a "K" because an earlier film starting with a "K" was greatly successful. Then there are the heroes and the heroines, the lucky ones and the unlucky ones. The producers take their astrological charts and consult the astrologers about that too. But despite this I do not see any great contradiction between pragmatics and astrology. Film-making in India is a terribly uncertain profession. Like politics. Even the most rational choice cannot guarantee you success. So you need to justify your rational choices. Mrs Gandhi was a hardboiled, highly calculative politician, but she also visited the necessary temples to ensure success.

CP: *Do you see this as a defiance, a positive strategy, a vestigial trace?*

AN: I see it as a strategy for survival. And as a rational adaptation to one's environment.

CP: *Throughout your work there is a parallelism between the "non-modern" and the "post-modern."*[14] *This reminds me of Arjun Appadurai's recent comments on the parallels between non-modern magical realisms and post-modern varieties ["the forms of 'magical realism' are many...the traditions in which they have been produced and enjoyed are multiple...it is not just a modern privilege to have blurred the line between fantasy, history and satire" (Appadurai 1991:474)].*

AN: Yes, I think that this is a search for—an attempt to rediscover—alternatives which in the West have been pushed to the margins and are almost non-existent and have to be recovered or recreated through novels or through postmodernist theory or some other attempt to transcend contemporary times. Whereas here [in South Asia] these options are present, right at the center, often among a majority; they are not marginalized. The range of choices is wider. This is a complex and diverse civilization—and this owes much to traditional texts and forms of awareness and even forms of self-mocking wit. There is a beautiful example Anantha Murthy [the Kannada novelist] gave me once. In the Kannada Ramayana, as in other Ramayanas, there is a dialogue between Sita and Rama. Rama doesn't want to take Sita with him to the forest when he went into exile because she would face discomfort and hardship. In every Ramayana there is this argument, but its contents vary In the Kannada Ramayana also, Sita says to Rama that it's her duty to be with him, and that she won't even enjoy the comforts of the palace without him, so it doesn't make any difference if she's in the forest with him, but at the end she adds, "Besides all this, in every other Ramayana, Sita goes to the forest with her husband, so how can you stop me from going!" It's an elegantly self-reflexive Brechtian comment and Indian diversity includes that, too. This diversity and local

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critical traditions are not dead. Many people have argued that irony is the central theme of Hindi movies—for instance *Hero Hiralal*[15]—is basically just a take-off of Hindi movies.

CP: *There is lots of exciting work coming out of* Public Culture, *but it seems to be privileging the urban and the global as against the local.*[16] *That becomes problematic in India because then everyone just does studies of cinema hoardings and no one wants to look at different kinds of* matkas *(earthenware pots) in obscure villages.*

AN: Yes, an ethnography of film viewing could transcend some of these problems so that one could see what a film means at different levels. I would be most sympathetic to that sort of effort.

CP: *You once wrote that you are more interested in having a dialogue with the person in the street rather than with other academics.*

AN: Well, I'm not making a populist argument. I'm making an argument of a different kind and perhaps I should spell it out. I think that in every society the overlap between the intellectual and the academic is never complete. But in some societies at certain points of time the overlap can be very little or it can be immense. The United States and France at the moment are in a phase where the overlap is almost total. If you thought very hard you might get three or four intellectuals who are not academics. But there the list would more or less end. In these countries there are not many influential intellectuals who are not academics. But things were very different a couple of decades ago. America had the likes of Lewis Mumford, and the French intellectual scene was dominated by Sartre. But in India at this point of time, for some reason, the overlap has diminished, instead of increasing. There are many human rights activists, social activists, and political activists who are doing fantastic work at the ground level, and with whom I have been involved on and off, and from whom I have learned more than from academics who approach their problems as if it was a matter of cognitive puzzle-solving. It was to that difference that I was alluding. Even those who call themselves academics in India should know which way their intellectual survival lies.

Maybe in the future the Indian academe will incorporate more intellectuals. Meanwhile, it seems to me that many scholars don't have enough imagination and sense of survival. After all, the academic game can be played by Indian scholars in American universities much better than by established scholars in India because of easy access to other facilities. Yet Indian scholars pathetically try to replicate what is done in universities in the United States. They are in no position to compete in, say, a conventional study of the hermeneutics of *Naseeb* with the right kind of referencing to Jameson or Hall, or Derrida or Lacan.

CP: *So what should they be doing?*

AN: I'm not saying that they should ditch the Western academe entirely, but they would be much better off trying to enrich their work by looking around them and listening to the intellectual debates going on in their own society and other Southern societies. For instance they might do an ethnography of say, *Naseeb*, or a particular genre of films in comparison with the currently popular Pakistani television series. They will probably learn more and be able to say more. But because of their infatuation with Western scholarship they have nothing to share with the Pakistanis next door or with the Bangladeshis. There are fantastic comparisons to be made with cinema in Egypt, Algeria, Hong Kong, etc. There is no attempt to explore experiences. Most academics like to make books out of books, not even books out of books *and* life. I would very modestly plead that there is a place for both in Indian intellectual life. But, I mostly see only a pathetic attempt to mimic. In reaction, there is in my works probably an overdone or studied underestimation of Western academic works.

CP: *You don't then see it as strategic mimicry to survive in an international academic market? In* The Intimate Enemy *(1983:107-8) you refered to Illich's account of how Aztec priests were thrown to the dogs because they had said that if what the Spanish priests said about their gods being dead, then they too would rather be dead. You hypothesized that a group of Brahman priests in the same circumstances would have embraced Christianity, written elegant praises to their rulers and their gods, while all the while their Hindu beliefs remained unshaken. Isn't this part of that process?*

AN: No, I'm afraid it's not that.

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Nandy dedicated a recent volume (1987) to "those who dare to defy the given models of defiance," and as I left this garden in Delhi I was struck by the the power of his own noble brand of essentialism. Subsequently, in the *Times of India* (27.4.94), Nandy wrote the following commentary on Mahatma Gandhi that was pregnant with parallels to his own work, and gave me a sense of the 'everydayness' within which Nandy himself has chosen to operate:

> He stands for the unheroic [...and] represented the ordinary, 'superstitious' sceptical, tradition-bound, wily Indian... Whatever touch of heroism we see in the Gandhian political style is built paradoxically on the assumption of that unheroic everydayness.... Anti-Gandhianism springs from the awareness that while we can elect our leaders every five years, we cannot elect our people...

Nandy concludes that "We are stuck with the Indians as they are. And most westernized and semi-westernized, Indians, including the votaries of *Hindutva*, resent that" Many readers may have reservations about this putative perpetuity, but they may also come to value the wisdom of those vestigial dialects that lie at the heart of some peoples' everyday heroism.

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NOTES

1. Uberoi (1984:9).
2. Though note that he has declared that he is *not* a Gandhian (1990b:16). For some sense of his criticisms, and also of Nandy's affinity, see "From Outside the Imperium: Gandhi's Cultural Critique of the West" in Nandy (1987). The tenacity of the 'neo-Gandhain' label is understandable in the light of many of his public statements and indeed some of the conversation reported here.
3. For a very recent elaboration of this, specifically in relation to Rabindranath Tagore's later work, see *The Illegitimacy of Nationalism* (1994).
4 It is interesting to note in this context Nandy's disparagement of Salman Rushdie, whom he concedes has—in his fiction—uniquely captured the elements of the new urban Indian popular culture, but whose social and political writings are "terribly like what someone like Jawaharlal Nehru would have said about the public realm today if he were recalled in a seance by an enterprising medium" (1990b:16).
5. Elsewhere he suggests a broader realm of the "vulgate" which acts "as a cultural 'underground' rather than as a legitimate form of popular culture" (1992:45). This would include "*bat-tala* [popular Bengali publishing], calendar art and the bow-tie wearing waiter in the cheap back-street restaurant who has been simultaneosuly attracting and intimidating the first-generation immigrant to the city since the last century" (1992:45).
6. 17th November 1993.
7 Here Nandy acknowledges the productivity of what he elsewhere calls a "bicultural...technique of survival that has now become a character trait" (1993:43), as embodied in figures like Satyajit Ray. At other times (and later in this conversation), such hybridity is castigated for empty mimicry—what he calls "the pathology of cultural mimicry that colonialism endorsed" (ibid).
8. Directed by Yash Chopra in 1975.
9. Directed by Mehbboob Khan in 1957.
10. A Hindi satellite channel broadcast by Rupert Murdoch's Star TV
11. Directed by Chandra Barot, 1978.
12. Directed by Manmohan Desai, 1981.
13. An auspicious period during which important and uncertain work can be inaugarated.
14. See Bhabha's (1994:251ff) use of this to understand more fluid, hybrid, conexts than Nandy has in mind.
15. Directed by Ketan Mehta, 1988.
16. A reflection, I believe, of the contributors, rather than the editors (Carol Breckenridge and Arjun Appadurai).

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